



Preliminary Results from the Long-Term Inmate Survey: Focus on Child Abuse Histories

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by

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Child abuse and neglect have been addressed by many disciplines of government for a variety of reasons. Departments of youth services and departments of social work across the country are concerned with intervening such that youth are protected from abuse. These interventions tend to focus on separating the child from the situation with secondary attention towards ameliorating the situation.

Schools and medical doctors are expected (often required by law) to report abuse. Their role is to be the eyes and ears of regulatory agencies (e.g., police, social services). As with police the principal role is to provide information to insure that extant abuse is stopped.

Police intervene to stop the current abuse and insure that the abuser is available for prosecution. Police intervene when as Klockars suggests “Something ought not to be happening about which something ought to be done now” (1985:16).

Courts in concert with corrections also have a role in identification of abuse and assignment of abusers to treatment. Their role is different than others noted above in that their focus is not on the abused child but on the abuser. Courts focus on adjudication of those charged with abuse (both civilly and criminally), assign blame, and prescribe treatment (sentence). Correctional agencies administer the sentence. Correctional agencies are in the unique position to “fix” the abuser, as adjudicated abusers become wards of the correctional system. This offers correctional agencies both the time and opportunity to transform abusers. The only agency of government that focuses on repairing the abuser is corrections—all others focus on separating the child from the abuser (social services often make services available to abusers but their focus is on the child’s welfare). This unique opportunity promises to diminish child abuse by treating the abuser.

The focus on abusers occurs for several reasons. First, there is the hope that successful treatment will result in cession of abusive behavior—a good in its own right. The second reason, is that abusers are thought to produce abusers. That is, children who are abused are thought to grow up to be abusers creating a production cycle of abusers. Additionally, there is ample empirical evidence that a history of child abuse is related to a wide range of juvenile and adult behavioral problems, many of which land victims of abuse into the criminal justice system as offenders

This report presents the results of the first pass through data collected from long-term inmates under the supervision of the Alaska Department of Corrections about their histories of abuse when they were children. The report is organized about a brief review of what is known about incidence of child abuse in the general population and in inmate populations. This review is followed by a brief description of the current research effort. Finally, initial findings about incidence of child abuse are highlighted.

Incidence of Child Abuse in American Society

The incidence of child abuse in the society is captured in several polls that asked national probability samples of adults if they had been victims of abuse as children. The following three surveys provide a window into the cross-national incidence of child abuse. In 1989 the Gallup organization asked a sample of survey respondents “Were you, yourself, ever a victim of child abuse” (cited in the 1989 Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics)—8 percent indicated yes (5 percent for males, 10 percent for females). In 1994 the Gallup organization asked a more focused question “When you were growing up, do you remember any time when you were punched or kicked or choked by a parent or other adult guardian” (cited in 1993 Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics)—12 percent indicated yes (13 percent of males, and 10 percent of females). Finally, in 1995 the Gallup organization posed question focused on child sexual abuse. They asked if parents, as children, had been touched in a sexual way or forced to touch someone else in a sexual way—23 percent indicated they had. The same survey asked if they had been forced to have sex before they were 18—slightly less than 10 percent indicated yes. What is apparent is that child abuse is frequent—at least if you ask people if they had experienced abuse. Based on these surveys it appear that somewhere between 1 in 10 and 1 in 5 children will experience some form of abuse.

Incidence of Child Abuse Among Prisoners

The survey of the literature isolated six studies of adult prisoners that are reviewed here. The first of these studies is a Survey of Prisoners, by the U. S. Bureau of the Census on behalf of the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the second and third studies were conducted by Departments of Corrections in Virginia and Oregon; and the fourth, fifth, and sixth studies by independent researchers with the cooperation of the departments of corrections responsible for the prisoners studied, Weeks and Widom (in press), Dutton and Hart (1992) and Dewey (1997). These six studies sampled prisoners from 45 randomly selected states, Virginia, Oregon, New York, the Pacific Region of Canada, and Alaska respectively. Four of these studies used personal interviews of the prisoners as their method of data collection, one relied upon official records, and one used a self-administered survey.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (1993) found lower rates of reported abuse than the other studies reviewed here. These rates were 12 percent for males and 31 percent for female prisoners reporting a history of child abuse. Though the BJS publication does not discuss the basis of these estimates, review of instruments presently in use by BJS suggests that their questionnaire elicits information only about serious assault (shot at or knifed) and serious sexual assault (sexual contact against will). This suggests that the Bureau of Justice Statistics was utilizing a narrow definition of abuse. Further there were few probing questions to stimulate the subjects memory. Thus, it appears likely that instrumentation accounts for the lower incidence of reported abuse in the BJS prisoner’s survey.

The Virginia Department of Corrections (1983) study of the child abuse histories of prisoners relied in an abbreviated six item questionnaire (two demographic questions, one abuse question with a follow-up about the abuser, and two questions concerned with whether the inmate had abused his/her children). The abuse question was designed to reflect statutory requirements for legal abuse in place at the time in Virginia. The study isolated rates of child abuse histories among the prisoners of 28% for males and 0% for females.¹ The authors of the study urged caution in relying on these findings.

The Oregon Department of Corrections (1993) and the Dewey (1997) focused their inquiries on incarcerated women. The Oregon study interviewed a random sample of 89 women housed at the Oregon Women's Correctional Center and the Columbia River Correctional Institution. The Dewey study was based on self selected samples of 49 women at two Alaska correctional facilities, Meadowcreek and Sixth Avenue Correctional Center, who completed self-administered surveys. Both studies reported high rates of child abuse victimization among women prisoners, 72 percent in Oregon and 73.5 percent in Alaska. Neither of these studies defined the terms they used, leaving the respondent to evaluate what was meant by abuse. The Oregon study asked "would you say that you were ever physically abused. . . would you say that you have ever been molested, raped or sexually abused" (Oregon Dept. of Corrections, 1993 p. 5). Likewise Dewey asked the subjects "if, as a child they had experienced sexual, emotional, and/or physical abuse" (Dewey, 1997 p. 35). It is noteworthy that the self-administered questionnaire used in the study of Alaska women and interview instrument used in Oregon produced similar results.

The Weeks and Widom (in press) study focused on male inmates. This study included both the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) and the Self-Report of Child Abuse Physical (SRCAP) in their instrument to measure physical abuse. The CTS instrument utilizes a stricter definition than the SRCAP limiting child abuse to the very severe violence level of the scale. The CTS instrument resulted in 34.9 percent of the prisoners reporting child abuse. Using the SRCAP instrument 58.1 percent of the prisoners reported being abused as a child. Combining the two instruments resulted in 68 percent of the prisoners reporting some kind of physical abuse as a child. The study also captured information about childhood sexual abuse and neglect. Weeks and Widom found that slightly more than 14 percent of prisoners report some form of sexual abuse and about 16 percent report neglect both before age 12.

The Dutton and Hart (1992) study used official records as their data source for information about male inmates incarcerated at seven Correctional Service of Canada institutions within the Pacific Rim. These records included criminal records, police reports, medical, psychological and psychiatric evaluations, and social services records. Dutton and Hart reported rates of 31 percent for physical abuse, 11 percent sexual abuse and 13 percent other abuse (includes extreme neglect

¹ Only 18 women responded to the survey, none indicating a history of abuse. The authors of the original study were justifiably skeptical of this result and caution against its use.

and witnessing interparental physical or sexual assault). These results are similar to that obtained in Weeks and Widom (in press).

If we rely on the Weeks and Widom (in press) and the Dutton and Hart studies we would estimate the male inmate abuse and neglect populations in Alaska's prisons as follows. We would expect that between 30 and 40 percent of male inmates have child physical abuse histories, between 10 and 15 percent have child sexual abuse histories, and that about 15 percent were neglected as children. The studies in Oregon (Oregon DOC, 1993) and earlier in Alaska (Dewey, 1997) present a far different picture for women. Though neither study provided information about types of abuse (e.g., physical, sexual, or neglect) both lead us to expect in excess of 70 percent of incarcerated women to have histories of child abuse.²

Outline of the Research Project

In cooperation with the DOC, the Justice Center developed a phased approach to the project that would allow for a substantive description of the general long-term inmate population to be prepared by mid-April. The three phases would be:

- 1) a literature review, congregate interview protocol development, and a descriptive report;
- 2) a face to face interviews and official file reviews; and
- 3) an extensive analysis of the combined data to isolate correlates.

Phase One. The first phase began with an extensive literature review of existing inmate surveys addressing the project's concerns that then aided in the development of all of the project's survey instruments. The literature review was further divided into those studies that focused on the definitions of abuse and neglect and those studies which focused on the methods of collecting that type of information from an incarcerated population. The project's congregate interview instrument was developed from the best aspects of the existing surveys, pre-tested upon a small group of inmates and modified slightly for use in Alaska. The literature review also provided guidance on conducting surveys with inmates but we relied heavily on the expertise of DOC personnel on how to recruit inmates for the congregate interviews in the various institutions. The Justice Center has completed congregate interviews with 241 inmates with sentences of 5 years or more (an overall response rate of 35 percent).

Phase Two. The next phase will consist of face to face interviews with selected inmates and a review of inmate files. The literature review has guided the development of the face to face interview

² A 1987 study by the American Correctional Association reports that slightly more than 60 percent of incarcerated women reported childhood physical abuse and nearly 55 percent reported childhood sexual abuse (cited in 1992 Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics at p. 651).

protocol and the coding sheet for the inmate record review. A summary report of that information will also be prepared.

Phase Three. The last phase involves an extensive and sophisticated analysis of the data to identify underlying relationships not easily visible from the descriptive data. This final report will be completed by June 30, 1998.

Study Subjects. The original RFP target population was described as “long-term” offenders. DOC defined this as those sentenced to prison for 5 years or more. DOC provided the Justice Center with the list of subjects broken down by institution. Each institution further evaluated the list with respect to the criteria. This final list of inmates was the target population and each of these was given an opportunity to participate. Both male and female inmates were targeted.

During the course of the literature review it became apparent that there are many definitions of childhood physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect that are not well defined in the literature either for the general population or for incarcerated populations. Ours is a hybrid instrument that uses pieces of other instruments that we deemed appropriate to the project. Some of the pieces have been defined by their creators as specific sub-scales and we have tried to keep these sub-scales intact in order to provide comparable data. These sub-scales define physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect and we have followed the respective original creators in summarizing and presenting this information.

In reporting these data the figures summarized the data from the congregate interviews. Many items on the questionnaire asked the inmate to rate the frequency of a particular behavior. These figures report the percentage of inmates who indicated that the target behavior had occurred at least once. This definition is in keeping with many of the studies found in the literature. The racial, ethnic, and offense categories follow the OBSCIS coding of these variables. DOC supplied this latter information.

Data Collection

The Justice Center staff worked closely with the individual institution contacts identified by DOC Headquarters. Each institution advised a slightly different method of securing the cooperation of the target population. However, once the final institutional pool was assembled, the survey process was the same. The Justice Center Research Associates explained the nature of the study and its content to the assembled inmates and asked for their voluntary cooperation. Those that remained were given the response booklet and answer sheet. An overhead projector was used in conjunction with reading each question. Some questions required the inmate to fill in their response on a Scantron answer sheet and other questions were answered directly on the response booklet. Every effort was made to minimize interactions and maximize the privacy of the respondents. The Justice Center Research Associates answered individual questions, monitored the inmates as they responded and collected all materials. Some inmates were given incentives to participate and others

were not. This did not appear to change the rate of volunteering. Each session took about 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Justice Center staff visited seven institutions and obtained 241 surveys. The Scantron answer sheets were mechanically scored and Justice Center Research Associates coded those written in the response booklets. A database was begun on these respondents. Additional information from OBSCIS was obtained from DOC and added to the database. The data was analyzed using SPSS.

Preliminary Findings

The attached figures present a description of child abuse histories of long-term inmates housed with the Alaska Department of Corrections. The following presents highlights from those tables.

- The first series of figure (Figures 1-3) provide information about the measures. The measures used in this study mix levels of seriousness so the summated scales mix serious and less serious forms of abuse (Figure 1-3). We will refine the measures for use in the final reports. We find that long-term offenders report considerably higher levels of abuse than the general population.
- We expected that female inmates would be more likely to experience sexual abuse than men. When asked to describe the early childhood sexual history women were marginally more likely to experience sexual abuse. However, when the question turned to whether that history was viewed as sexual abuse women inmates were four times more likely to consider that they had been abused as children (Figure 3).
- The Alaska DOC long-term inmate population experienced a higher incidence of child abuse than we expected (Figure 4).
- Women in custody are much more likely than men to experience abuse as children (Figure 4).
- African-Americans are more likely to experience abuse than others (Figure 5).
- When the analysis shifts to comparison of offenders (type of offense) again the Alaska population is more likely to experience abuse than expected (Figure 6).
- An unexpected finding was that property offenders were more likely to have been abused as children than others were (Figure 6). We expected violence in childhood to produce violence in adulthood. We will explore the possibility that more serious forms of abuse are related to adult violence more than less serious forms.
- Inmates who reported no juvenile arrests were less likely to report histories of child abuse. Those with many arrests were considerably more likely to report early childhood abuse (Figure 7).
- Relatedly, those inmates who report first arrest at a young age were also more likely to report histories of child abuse (Figure 8).

- Where inmates grew up seems to be related to their child abuse experience. Inmates who went to elementary school in Alaska villages (on the road or not) were less likely to have abuse histories (except for neglect) than inmates from Anchorage elementary schools or elementary schools outside Alaska (Figure 9).
- Inmates who grew up in two parent families were less likely than other to report having been abused (Figure 10).
- Inmates whose parents were substance abusers (either alcohol or other drugs) were more likely to report abuse as children (Figure 10).

There were very few surprises in these data. The most compelling finding is how much abuse long-term inmates reported. We were not surprised that this population was abused as children but we were not prepared for the magnitude or the rates. The present analysis has adopted measures of abuse to provide a basis for comparison with extant literature. In the following stages of the research project we will refine the measures, particularly to isolate more serious forms of abuse, so that correlates of abuse may be less ambiguously explored.

Figure 1 Percent of Long-term Inmates Reporting Specific Types of Physical Abuse

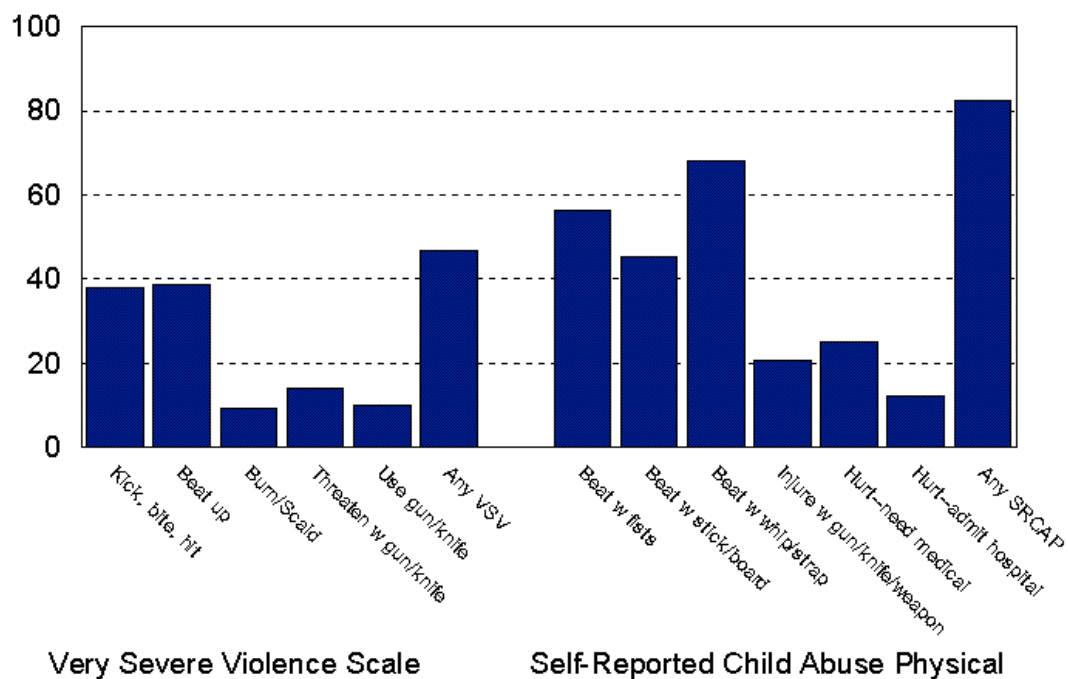


Figure 2 Percent of Long-term Inmates Reporting Specific Types of Neglect

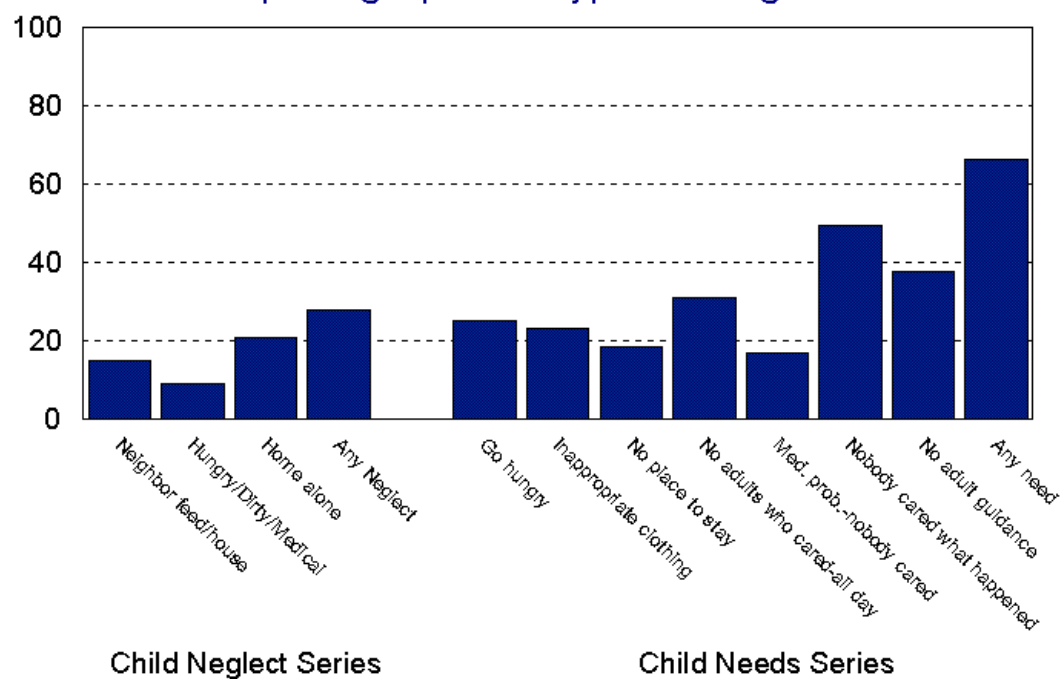


Figure 3 Person of Long-term Inmates Reporting Specific Types of Sexual Abuse

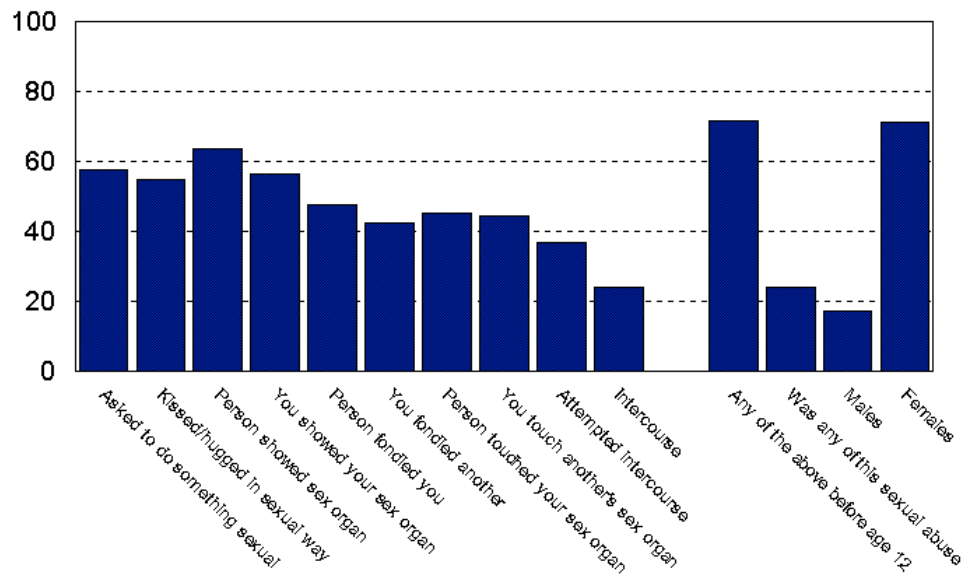


Figure 4 Percent of Long-term Inmates Reporting Abuse as Children

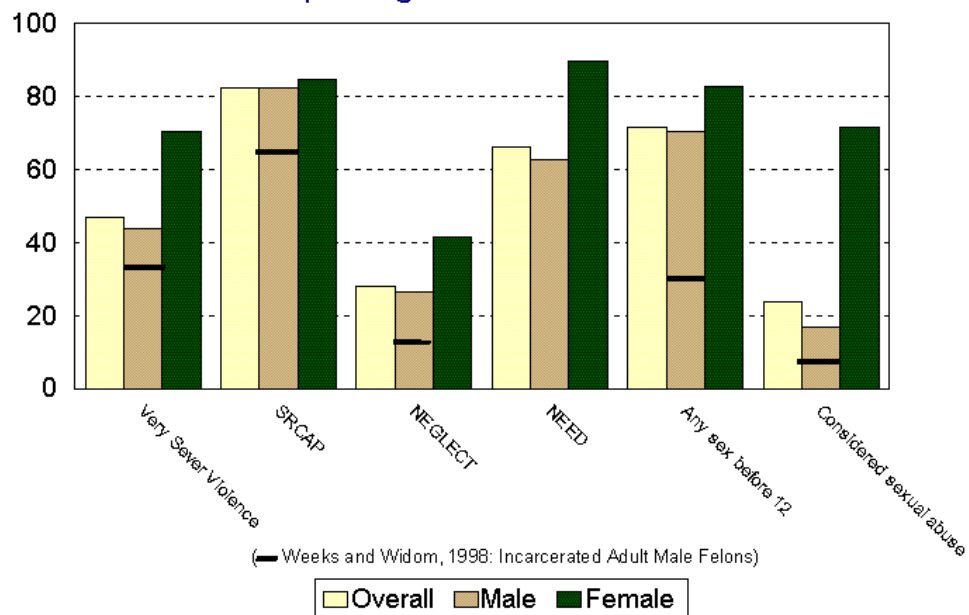


Figure 5 Percent of Long-term Inmates Reporting Abuse as Children by Race

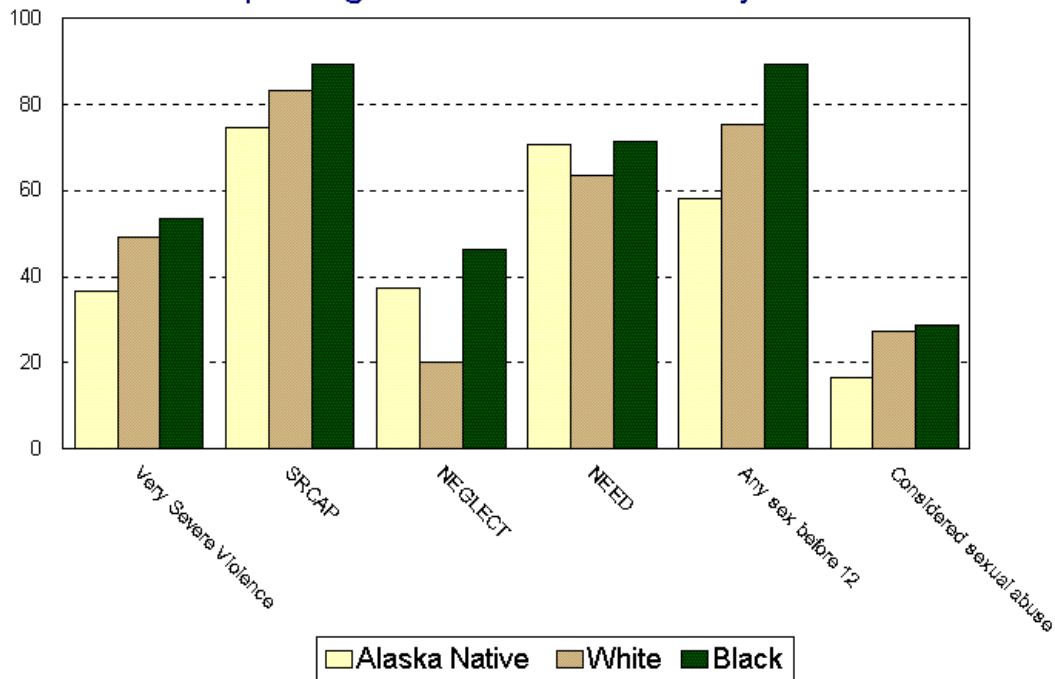


Figure 6 Percent of Long-term Inmates Reporting Abuse as Children by Nature of Conviction Offense

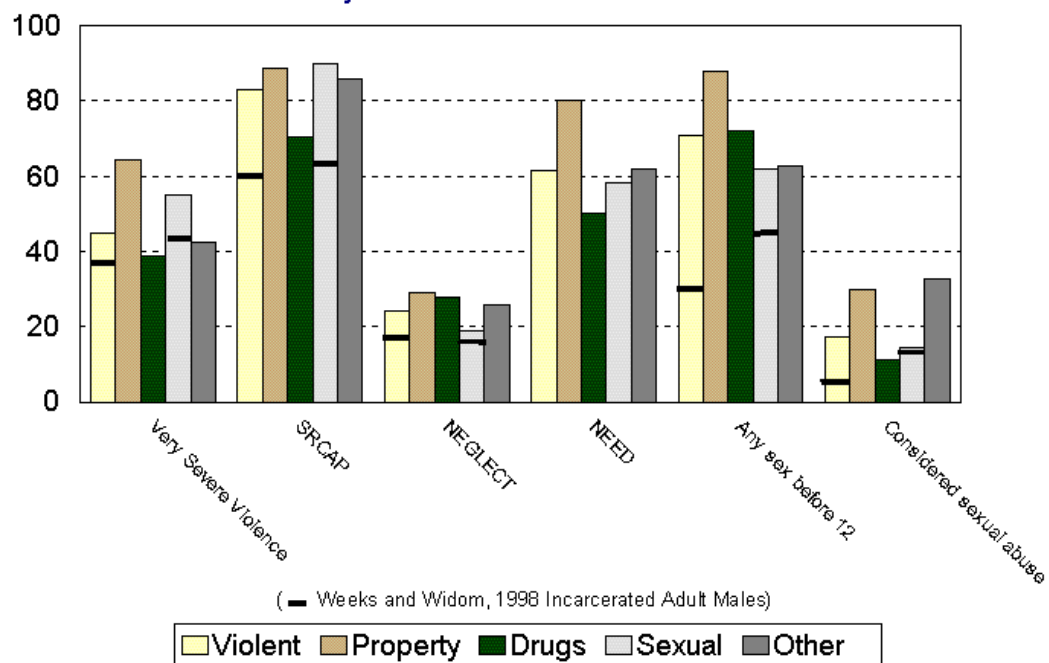


Figure 7 Percent of Long-term Inmates Reporting Abuse as Children by Arrest Histories

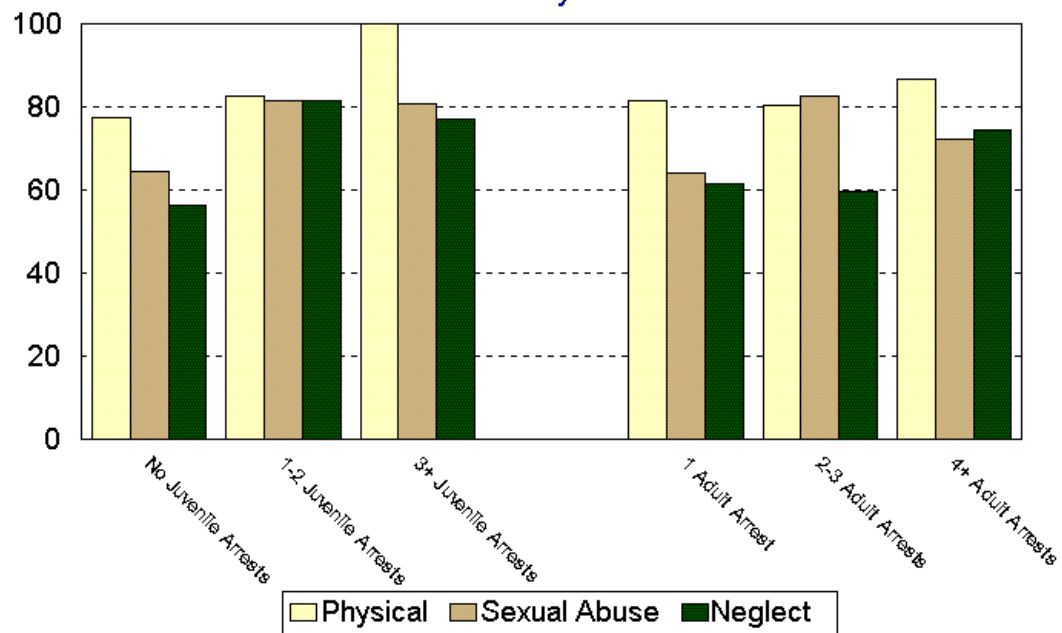


Figure 8 Percent of Long-term Inmates Reporting Abuse as Children by Type of Abuse and Age at First Arrest

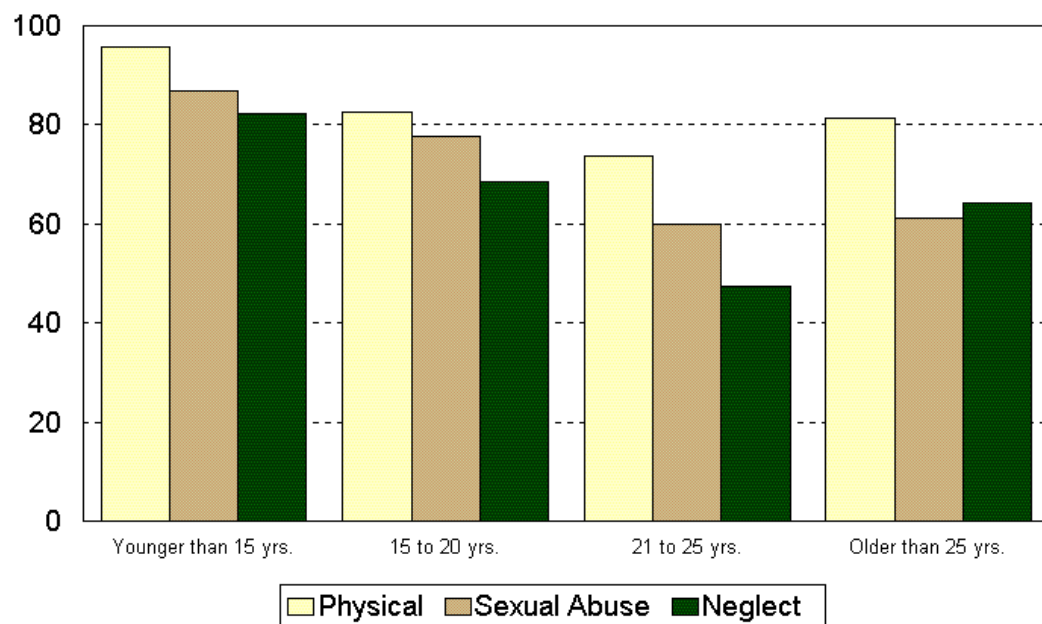


Figure 9 Percent of Long-term Inmates Reporting Abuse as Children by type of Abuse and Elementary School Location

The focus on elementary school location is an effort to capture the place where inmates were children.

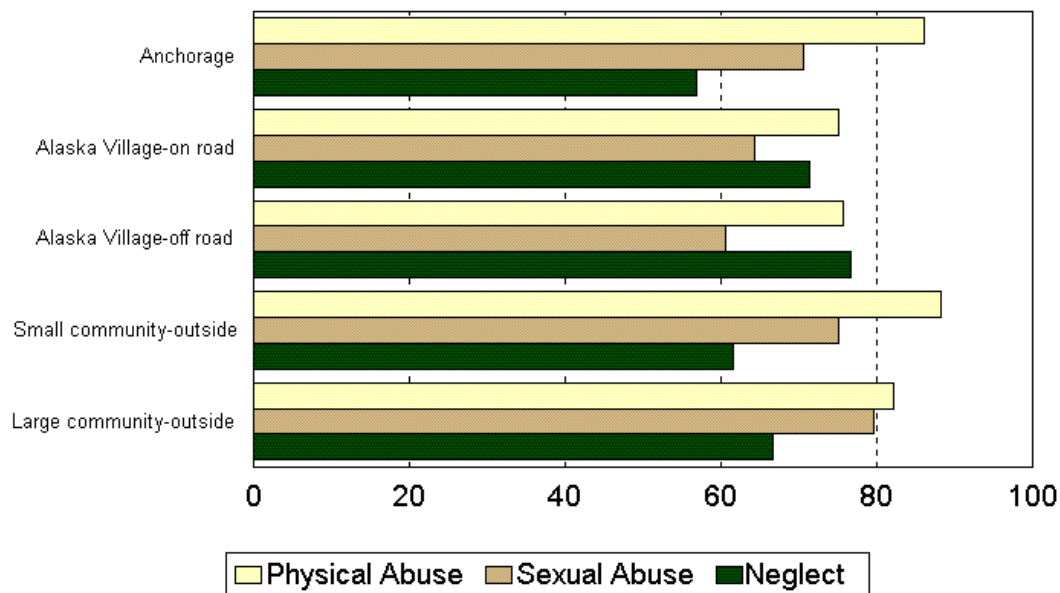
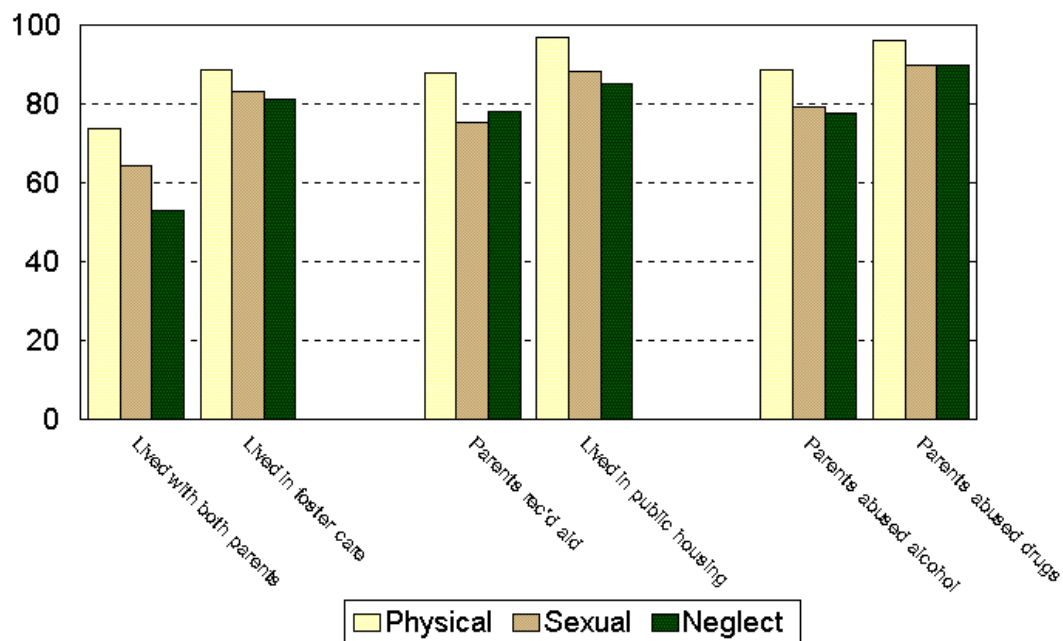


Figure 10 Percent of Long-term Inmates Reporting Abuse as Children by Type of Abuse and Family History



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